

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Toni Harper. I am a third year student at Kent State University who is African American and a woman. I have a major in Visual Communication Design under the College of Communication and Information and a minor in Drawing, as I'm skilled and passionate about art and illustration and have been for all of my life. Creating art was always something I wanted to do and I went to higher education to pursue the goal of creating art professionally, both things that have taken years of hard work and stride to accomplish. I am strongly opposed to SB 1 and its companion bill HB 6.

Growing up, my family wasn't always the most financially stable, as there were 5 kids under one roof and both of my parents worked minimum wage jobs for most of my childhood. We couldn't afford the nicest things or went to the most prestigious schools. But one thing held stable, our parents getting my siblings and I to reach for opportunities to help better our social lives, our community building, career path finding and education. Art programs, summer camps, education programs, college programs, we did it all. And during my time at those programs throughout the years, nearly all of the children were African American, like me. We all had our own goals, our own passions that we wanted to succeed in when we finally got older. We were told we could do it, and anyone who didn't believe so was just wrong. My teachers and advisors wanted to see us succeed, because they knew that we deserve the opportunity to, just like everyone else in the world.

When I was accepted into Kent State, I knew that I would be attending a predominantly white school. As I've gotten older, my classmates at my schools went from mostly black students to half black students (plus other minorities, such as hispanic and asian) and half white students. 72.9% of the student body at Kent State is white, and while that isn't an inherently bad thing at all, it does make me weary, and I started to question if there were opportunities for people like me at the school. So, I started to do my research and I found programs that are made for people of color and minorities who also want to find other students who look like them, and say "Hey! I'm not the only one!" Kupita/Transiciones was the program my sister and I signed up for. It's a free program that includes a cultural orientation, transition experience and year-long mentoring program for newly admitted and transfer African American, Latinx, Hispanic, Native American and Multiracial students. That program gave me more insight at the cultural history at Kent State when it came to people of color, and it made me feel like I did belong there. I made lifelong friends and overall it made me more confident to start school, and that I wasn't alone. My sister and I also joined the Black United Students program, in which students of African descent come together and have cultural conversations and events, while also having fun and community.

These programs made me break out of my shell and experience college in the way that I was anticipating. So, seeing that this bill will likely put an end to them puts an end to our safe spaces. It puts an end to discussing racism, politics, and the black experience at college. Removing diverse programs would affect students of color negatively. They exist to combat racism and discriminatory practices against marginalized groups. There's a reason why they're here, and if you all don't want diversity to be acknowledged it wouldn't have to be if people weren't hateful towards them to begin with. Students of all races and backgrounds deserve the opportunity to pursue their careers. And with that, they deserve to feel safe and talk to others who can relate to them about their struggles or accomplishments. Many of us have worked very hard to be in college, and a lot of us fought to be recognized as someone who deserves to be in higher education at all. So why not talk about our history? Black people weren't allowed to be in higher education until the 1800s, and most of them were segregated until the mid 1950s. Removing actual history from these schools is unjust and rather disgusting. It's a form of censorship, and free speech applies everywhere, even if you don't want to hear it or feel guilty about it.

I deserve to attend college just like everyone else and so do other people of color, especially African Americans. We were given the opportunity to be here and it hasn't been an easy journey, but we should be allowed to continue on with these diverse programs to let new and current students know that they should be here.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.